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ABSTRACT

Students experience homophobia in both covert and overt forms. Covert homophobia exists through the neglect of gay, lesbian, and bisexual topics in graduate psychology programs. Overt homophobia exists through the misinformation and perpetuation of stereotypes by faculty, textbooks, and program administrators. Unfortunately little data exist regarding the prevalence of overt homophobia in psychology programs. In this study psychology graduate students (N=79) were surveyed about experiences of homophobic bias they encountered in their programs. The survey asked students questions about their exposure to anti-gay, -lesbian, and -bisexual content in textbook passages, instructor comments, and other facets of graduate training. All but two of the respondents identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. These were the implications of the results: (1) psychology programs not only fail to make appropriate mention of gay topics, they also at an alarming rate, misinform, miseducate, and mislead people who will educate others regarding sexuality issues; (2) in nearly all cases course instructors fail to refute the misstatements of textbooks; (3) students' attempts to expand curricula, to further research, and to fill the existing void of information are thwarted not only by instructors, but also by practicum advisors, administrators, and thesis advisors; and (4) the burden of educating other students currently lies with gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, with the student, rather than the instructor or program becoming the vehicle for advancement of the field. (ABL)

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Homophobia in Psychology Programs:

A Survey of Graduate Students

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Students experience homophobia in both covert and overt forms. Covert homophobia exists through the neglect of gay, lesbian, and bisexual topics in graduate programs. APA's ethics policy requires practitioners to "maintain knowledge of current and professional information related to the services they render." Since nearly all psychologists will encounter clients with sexuality concerns, psychology education programs are ethically bound to include information relevant to lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities. However, the APA Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns has found that very few programs offer clinical training in the area of sexual orientation. Education and training in graduate schools of psychology inadequately prepare students for work with sexual minorities.

Overt homophobia exists through the misinformation and perpetuation of stereotypes by faculty, textbooks, and program administrators. Unfortunately, little data exist regarding the prevalence of overt homophobia in psychology programs. To gain insight into these questions, Neil and I surveyed psychology graduate students about experiences of homophobic bias they encountered in their programs. Should a substantial number of graduate students report having encountered such discrimination, then we would argue that the first steps to correct the neglect would be to remedy the prejudices of psychology trainers.

Neil and I prepared a survey that asked students about their exposure to anti-gay, -lesbian, and -bisexual content in textbook passages, instructor comments, and other facets of graduate training. We distributed this survey to the graduate student members of APA Division 44, the Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian and Gay Issues. We felt this group would be the most likely to be sensitized to these issues.

To maintain the confidentiality of the individuals, the Division 44 Membership Chair performed the mailing on our behalf. In April, the survey was sent to the 167 graduate student affiliates, with a reminder card following three weeks later. 79 surveys, or 48%, were returned. A demographic comparison of our sample to the division's student membership revealed that we had a representative sample. Surveys were returned by an equal number of men and women from 24 states and 1 Canadian province. All but two of the respondents identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The sample had an age range of 23 to 50, with a median value of 31.

Students tended to be in the fourth or fifth years of their program, most often a Ph.D. or Psy.D. candidate in Clinical or Counselling Psychology.

The survey breaks down into five parts: part 1 requested demographic information from the respondents; part 2 asked them to provide information regarding homophobic passages they may have encountered in textbooks; part 3 was similar, but referred to statements made by course instructors; in part 4, we assessed how frequently relevant sexual orientation issues were incorporated into graduate courses; and part 5 solicited descriptions of discrimination from other sources in the psychology program, including being discouraged from research of gay, lesbian, or bisexual issues.

The results are disturbing by their magnitude. Combining all parts of the survey we found that 84% of the respondents encountered homophobic misinformation or outright discrimination from their graduate psychology program.

We appreciate the possibility that students with such experiences were more likely to have returned the survey. But, if we assume that most of the return failures were due to lack of homophobic experiences, then we still have nearly half of this minority population reporting this problem. Neither is an acceptable situation.

The types of homophobia and heterosexism break down as follows:

- 51% of the respondents report encountering homophobic misinformation in a textbook at least once.
- 56% of the respondents report encountering homophobic misinformation directly from a course instructor at least once.
- 55.7% of the respondents report discouragement from pursuing lesbian/gay research topics or experiencing overt discrimination or bias.

Part 2 of the survey asked graduate students to provide information regarding homophobic passages they encountered in textbooks. In addition to describing the passage itself, the survey asked for: details about the student's response to the passage, the instructor's response, the class' response, and, if possible, the author, title, and publisher. We received reports of 54 such homophobic passages.

The topics varied greatly, but four themes account for most of the passages: (A) Pathologizing homosexuality. Despite APA's formal position to the contrary, many texts continue to describe homosexuality as either a failure in development or a lack of healthy functioning. (B) Detecting homosexuality. In spite of the current research, texts still include information alleging the ability of psychological testing to detect "sexual inversion." (C) Conversion techniques. Many behavioral texts continue to claim the ability to convert people to heterosexuals through aversive techniques. Usually there is no discussion of the context or ethics of such a procedure. (D) Discussing homosexuality in the context of sexual disorders. Texts still group bisexuality and homosexuality with incest and fetishes.

Let me share with you one passage we received. After detailing zoophilia and pedophilia, the author illustrates homosexuality:

> There are many homosexuals whose personality development and ego functioning appear intact and who conduct themselves both effectively and constructively in society. [Yet,] these individuals . . . have difficulty in reconciling dependent and assertive drives, an ambivalent maternal relationship, and a high frequency of being reared in a broken home.
>
> In general, confirmed lesbians differ from healthy women in giving histories of exposure to severe abusiveness and alcoholism, the development of indifference toward men, the lack of gratifying relations with others, and loneliness. A considerable percentage become involved in health care work.

Such homophobic statements in psychology texts do more harm than offend the gay, lesbian, or bisexual student reading them. In addition to having the status of a published work, the particular text had been selected, and therefore endorsed, by the course instructor. A student without sufficient exposure will take this type of information at its face value. It is also possible for this information to be used by people outside of psychology to support homophobic agendas. Imagine a lawyer reading the above passage to a jury.

The majority of our respondents encountering homophobic passages in their textbooks reported feeling too uncomfortable to respond in any constructive manner. In 2/3's of the cases, the student never brought the issue up in class (n=35/53, or 66%). They brought their concerns to the course instructor in fewer than 15% of the cases (n=7/53, or 13.2%). Of the students who did make an overt reaction to the text,

they most commonly did so only by talking about it privately with other students. The low rate of challenging the text may be due to fear of rejection by classmates, fear of discrimination from faculty, or the student's own lack of resources with which to contradict the text. Each motivation is likely to play a part.

Course instructors were even less likely to correct the text than were the students. Instructors failed to refute the homophobic passage in 85% of the reported cases (n=44/52). In fact, the instructors were just as likely to *endorse* the passage, as they were to *refute* it (15.4% refute vs. 13.5% endorse; n=8 refute vs. n=7 endorse). Some students noted that not only did instructors fail to reject the passage, but they told the student not to overreact! In 21% of the cases, the instructor responded by inviting class discussion rather than by making a direct statement (n=11/52). Some may argue whether such neutrality is appropriate.

Like class instructors, class members were unlikely to reject the passage; 83% failed to do so. If the topic were brought up by the gay or lesbian student, the class was still most likely not to respond (37%, n=13/35). When they did respond and discuss the topic, they most often did so without resolution (28.8%; n=10/35). This seems to indicate that class instructors would be well advised to point out the fallacies of the texts explicitly rather than to remain neutral.

Part three of the survey asked students to provide information about homophobic statements made by their instructors. In addition to descriptions of such statements, the survey asked the student to provide details about their own response and that of the instructor. 56% of the survey respondents (n=44/79) reported encountering such homophobic remarks from an instructor at least once.

The content and nature of the statements varied considerably and included: the use of derogatory language such as "faggot" and "queer" when referring to clients, making use of stereotypes in class, minimizing the significance of coming out, pathologizing or even ridiculing homosexuality, condemning lesbian and gay parenting, refusing to include same-sex issues in the course syllabus, and describing homosexuality as an impediment to professional competence. These are a few of the responses that we received from students:

"While discussing neurological aspects of gait impairment, the instructor walked in front of the class with a limp wrist and a side-to-side swish motion, demonstrating what the instructor called the 'stereotypical fag walk.'"

"The instructor said that one must always intervene therapeutically with effeminate gay men because research shows that these people will have more difficulties and pathology later in life."

"In a course in psychological testing, the professor repeatedly connected homosexuality with pathological narcissism."

"The professor said, 'I don't mind faggots...I just don't want them recruiting children into their clan.'"

"In a discussion of lesbian parenting, the professor expressed concern for the safety of the young girls."

"My professor taught that adolescents who are coming out are experiencing a panic and a re-emergence of unsuccessfully negotiated oedipal stage issues."

Neil pointed out that respondents seldom felt comfortable responding to offensive passages in textbooks. In contrast, they challenged instructors' statements in the majority of the cases (76%; n=44/58). In half of the reported instances, the respondents raised the matter during class (n=29/58). In 35% (n=20/58), they discussed it privately with other students or class members. But only in 10% of the cases did they discuss the matter privately with the instructor (n=6/58).

Although the students tended to respond to the instructors' remarks, the instructor seldom retracted the statement (in 74%, they did not; n=26/35). On more than half of the occasions when a student voiced an objection, the instructor proceeded to defend the remark further (n=20/35 or 57%). The instructor invited class discussion around the matter following 20% of voiced objections (n=7/35), and retracted or qualified the statement only 23% of the time (n=8/35).

In **part 4**, we assessed how frequently relevant sexual orientation issues were incorporated into graduate courses. We designed a list of 22 issues and then asked students whether each was included in their courses. As a summary of them, let me highlight the following observations:

(A) For any given topic, most of the students never received relevant information from the course. For example: of the students who took Social

Psychology courses, 87% received no information regarding psychological correlates of homophobia; of the students who took courses in Behavioral Psychology, 91% received no information regarding sex therapy issues for homosexual behavior. (B) A few topics were covered somewhat more frequently. However, of the outliers, most were likely to consist of homo*phobic* coverage. That is, even though half of the students reported that psychoanalytic interpretations of homosexuality were covered, the context is likely to have been one of pathologizing homosexuality, as pointed out earlier. The only situation when the majority of students encountered homosexuality was in psychopathology classes! (C) If these situations are removed from the analysis, then students reported that relevant topics were excluded from courses 84% of the time.

As a final note, these numbers likely *over*report the frequency with which gay and lesbian topics are addressed. Although the survey specifically asked students to report only the gay and lesbian material included in course syllabi, several respondents noted on their form that some of their references arose from their own presentations, questions, or comments in class.

In part 5, we asked students if they had experienced any other form of overt homophobia from administrators, instructors, advisors, or placement supervisors. 47% (n=37/79) reported such experiences. Although there was considerable variability across students' experiences, a number of key themes emerged, including: derogatory references towards clients, pathologization of homosexuality, lack of a safe atmosphere for students, verbal abuse, harassment and discrimination, lack of information and resources, discouragement from faculty, inappropriate or undesired disclosure, offensive remarks, and blocking of student initiatives. Allow me to share with you some of the students' responses...

"My clinical supervisor referred to my client as 'the queer.'"

"In group supervision at a school-run clinic, the instructor said, 'All gay men have sex with one partner after another. They never have long-term relationships.'"

"My practicum supervisor presented a study in which he said gays were cured through behavioral treatments. He used this as evidence that gays should be treated as pathological."

"I am in the closet at school because of the experiences of another openly gay student in the department. When her supervisor, also the chair of our subprogram, found out that she is gay, he gave her negative evaluations. He is very homophobic and misogynistic. He has a great deal of power. So I feel I must watch my step."

"When asked to include gay and lesbian issues in the syllabus, a professor responded, 'If the students want changes, let them go through my syllabus and rewrite the lectures.'"

"The director of my program has known since I began the program that I am a lesbian. In my first year review, he told me I would never make it in this field. When I asked why, his response was, 'You are one of them...like those black panthers...a fucking feminist...and offensive to people.' Since then, he has gone out of his way to make it difficult for me in terms of being unavailable, not accepting course selections, and shooting me down in class discussions."

"As part of my application to the clinical psychology program of a prestigious university, I was interviewed by an influential senior professor. In the written statement of purpose included in my application, I had stated that I was gay. During the interview, the professor stated that regardless of changes in the DSM (politically motivated, she believed), she and her fellow faculty members all considered homosexuality a major character disorder, and she wondered how I would handle their statements to that effect during my training. She also told me that no openly gay man had completed this particular program in ten years."

"One member of my thesis committee asked to be excused because of his 'moral objections' to my research. The topic involved sampling a lesbian group. I had to replace him with another faculty member who did not have that problem."

"I was told to not 'act gay and make waves.'"

"A classmate and I decided to do a Coming Out Support Group for our community service project. The head of the psychology department called the Director of Clinical Training and told him that he would not approve of 'sex parties' at the Psychological Services Center. My classmate and I had to threaten to call APA to get our group approved."

Also in part 5, we asked students if they had been discouraged from pursuing research in gay, lesbian, or bisexual issues, and if so, to describe their experiences. 25% (n=20/79) reported such discouragement. Major themes included: having difficulty finding supervisors, warnings from faculty of adverse career consequences, interference and direct sabotage with research, and homophobic responses to dissertation topics. One student wrote:

"When I was lining up a committee to serve on my Master's thesis, I approached a faculty member and asked her to serve. Before I even had a chance to tell her what my topic was, she said, 'No, I'm not interested in what you study.'"

"A professor told me that my dissertation on lesbians was not 'real science' and that a dissertation on 'regular folks' would be better."

"The faculty at my program would not support research on gay-related issues. Also, I was told that under no circumstances would I be permitted to do a dissertation on adolescent AIDS."

"I was told that this is an unfundable, stigmatized area of research, and that I would never get a decent job if I pursued this area."

"I am currently doing my dissertation on lesbian relationship satisfaction. I know that I am placing myself at risk. The head of the department runs a dissertation seminar where we are required to present our proposals in class. I was warned not to present my real topic, and so I didn't. As a result, I did not get feedback on what I'm doing. I'm still anxious about the possibility of him trying to sabotage my completion of the dissertation, although I recognize that he does not truly have the power to do so."

"The instructor who taught our Review of the Literature course made a homophobic attack in response to my proposed dissertation topic. He acted so inappropriately that I reported him to my advisor and filed an informal complaint with the dean."

The unfortunate implications of these data are:

(A) Psychology programs not only fail to make appropriate mention of gay topics (as has been previously pointed out), they also at an alarming rate, *mis*inform, *mis*educate, and *mis*lead the very people who will educate others regarding sexuality issues. (B) In nearly all of the cases, course instructors fail to refute the misstatements of textbooks. Instructors themselves frequently misrepresent information regarding lesbian and gay topics, and are recalcitrant when challenged by students. (C) Students' attempts to expand curricula, to further research, and to fill the existing void of information are thwarted not only by instructors, but also by practicum advisors, administrators, and thesis advisors. (D) The burden of educating other students currently lays with gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. The student, rather than the instructor or program, has become the vehicle for advancement of the field.

Psychology as a field cannot hope to alleviate human suffering when its very sources of information cause it.

We thank all of the students who took time to complete and return our survey. We also thank you for the support you volunteered in your comments. As a final note to the officers of Div. 44 and NALGP, we would like to point out that it was clear to us from the responses that this survey has been perhaps the only outlet for students, including us, to express the frustration we feel in graduate programs. There is clearly great need for action, not only for ourselves, but for all the clients who will ever seek a therapist.

Thank you.